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A Critic's Choice

THE VENETIAN AFFAIR by Helen MacInnes. 405 pages. Harcourt, Brace & World, \$5.95.

There are moments in *The Venetian Affair* when the Piazza di San Marco seems with so many international cads and American gumshoes that there is hardly room for the tourists and the pigeons. But who cares? The movements of any first-rate thriller are as measured and predictable as the steps of a quadrille. Half the fun is knowing what is bound to happen next.

Affair begins, for instance, with a New York drama critic on a summer jaunt to Europe. As if by magic, Paris customs men switch his raincoat for one belonging to another tourist. The critic finds its lining contains ten—count 'em—ten \$10,000 bills. To no one's surprise, the critic turns out to be a former foreign correspondent who can order breakfast in at least six foreign languages and—what else?—a onetime OSS man in World War II. In no time at all he is up to his tweed lapels in a fell and fancy plot to blame the U.S. for bribing some Frenchmen to kill General Charles de Gaulle. Could this chicanery be anything less than the last and most dastardly doing of a case-



HELEN MACINNES

The fun is knowing where it's going.

hardened Commie villain called Alexei Vassilievitch Kalganov? It could not. Could anything be more cheerful than our hero's first assignment—a journey to Venice on the Simplon Express with a beautiful blonde, posing as her lover?

In a year dreadfully short of good novels, a skillful handling of these goings-on has made Helen MacInnes' book a runaway bestseller. Author MacInnes also clearly deserves some sort of votive offering from the Central Intelligence Agency. *The Venetian Affair*, in fact, is likely to do more for the CIA's image than a dozen apologies by Allen Dulles. Take the CIA man who tries to enlist the reluctant critic in the international struggle.

The critic affects the intellectual-detachment ploy. "How many political systems have come and gone since Sophocles wrote his plays?" he asks with the air of a man asking the unanswerable question. Far from swallowing his traditional cigar in chagrin, the CIA man briskly points out that only seven of Sophocles' 100 plays still exist. The rest were destroyed by the forces of war and political rivalry. With irrefutable logic, he finally gets the uncompromising aesthete to agree that "art is less important than life—provided the barbarians don't get their hands on it." The guy can shoot.

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